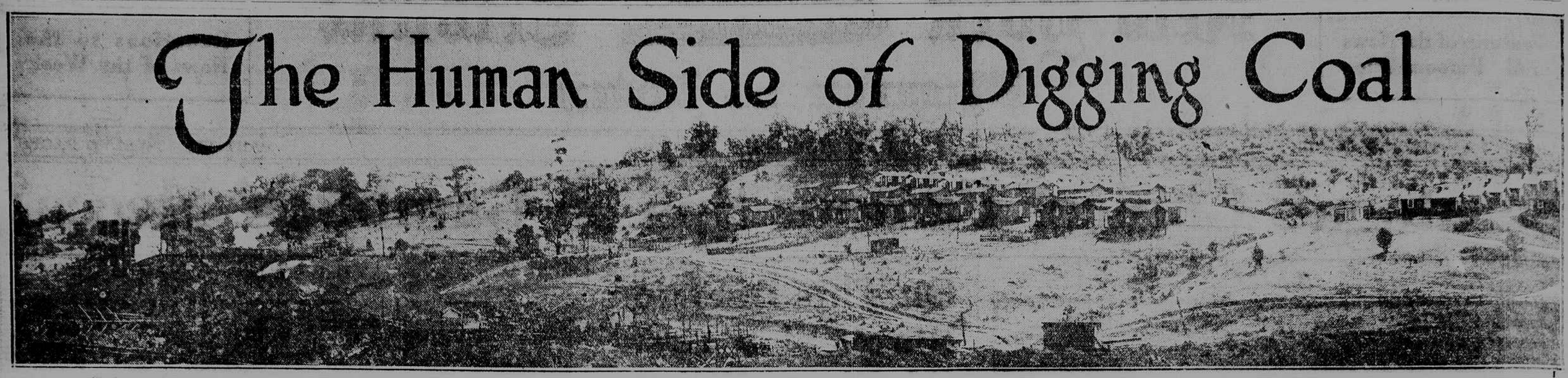
The Human Side of Digging Coal



This panorama shows us a typical Pennsylvania soft coal mine and community. The mine itself and the tipple are seen on the extreme left, while on the right are grouped some miners' cottages

By Theodore M. Knappen

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COAL MINING is a rural rather than an urban industry, and the miners are to be considered as villagers rather than as cits. There are some large cities whose population is largely made up of coal miners—such as Springfield, Ill., and Scranton, Pa., but the major part of the coal miners of America live in small towns and villages—hundreds of them having virtually no population outside the miners and their families. These village groups of people with the same industrial and livelihood interest have made organization of the miners into unions comparatively easy. For the same reason they require less leadership and direction in carrying on a strike than if they were dispersed in a large and diverse population.

Coal is found in almost every sort of topographical environment that the continent offers. You will find miners working in the pinnacled mountains of Washington and British Columbia on the very verge of the snow line, and you will find them burrowing underground in the level prairies of Kansas and Oklahoma, the rolling hills of Iowa, the flat lands of Illinois and Ohio and in all the reaches of the Appalachian mountain system southwestward of New York.

In all the agricultural regions where coal abounds the farmer and the miner live side by side, and work the one above the other. The one extracts from the depths of the earth the converted vegetation of geologic ages near to the birth of the world, while the other grows on its surface the economic vegetation of the human age.

A Shock

Coal is associated with the manufacturing industries, and one naturally thinks of the coal miner as a dweller in congested communities—a man who passes his days in subterranean darkness and gloom and his nights in crowded tenement slums. So it is with something of a shock of the incongruous when, motoring along a pleasant country road, you suddenly meet a throng of black-faced men with miners' lamp-caps. Almost before you realize it a turn of the road plunges you into a coal mining community set down in the midst of farms.

For the most part these mining villages are as architecturally hideous as the grimy workers are unlovely. In the country, they are distinctly not of it. All around rise the curved hills with their great sweeps of field and pasture, their groves and orchards and their nestling farmhouses. Beyond, in this foothill country of western Pennsylvania, ascend the blue ridges of the distant mountains. Below are the smoking stacks of the mine powerhouse and above are herds of cattle. It is but a step across a road from the huddled dwellings of the mine workers to the wide spaces of the fields. Hidden in gulches and valleys, the mining villages do not greatly affect the general rural aspect, but the streams, running yellow with the sulphur water pumped from the mines and lacking all aquatic life, tell the tale of man's marring activities.

The Tipple

The mine, of course, is the center of the village. It may be a shaft mine or a drift, that is, a tunnel mine; but in either case the chief object that marks its presence is the tipple. If the mine is operated by electricity, as many are these days, there may not be a powerhouse belching black clouds of smoke from its tall stacks. The tipple is the slanting structure that stands over the hoisting shaft or at the entrance of the drift, into which the coal is hoisted or trammed and within which is housed the machinery that dumps the skips and conveys the coal to the cars waiting underneath. It is the shipping shed of the mine. It and the powerhouses are about all that is visible of a coal mine. The "works" are below the surface.

Even the largest mines are disappointingly not in evidence by surface activities and structures. Not far from the tipple will be the company store and then near by are rows and rows of houses built on the same, usually ugly, plan and usually painted the same dreary maroon or dirty gray.

Until recent years all the houses in a mining village were exactly like each other in their ugliness, and also like those of every other village. They are—these elder monstrosities—two-family houses, with the front and back yards and porches divided precisely in the middle by fences and partitions. They have two stories and generally have four or five rooms on each side. The only attractive thing about them is the rent, which ranges from $5 to $12 a month. I should say that that is the only attractive feature as they were originally built, for most of them nowadays have flower gardens in front and vegetable gardens behind, and even a patch of lawn.

In all the older villages the bunkhouse and the boarding-house are gone. Perhaps because they are so near to roomy nature, the foreigners who constitute the bulk of the coal miners in these parts have adopted higher standards of living much more rapidly than their brethren of the steel mills. A bachelor has a hard time of it to find quarters, and the housewife thinks herself quite above taking boarders.

Finding a Boarding-House

A mine superintendent in a village near Pittsburgh, having engaged two likely new men the other day, assured them that he would find them a boarding place, so, taking them in tow, he called on a certain Mrs. Miner, who was not encumbered with a numerous progeny. In his best manner he asked her if she would consider taking on the two men.

"Does your wife take boarders?" she countered, and changed the subject to the weather.

"Oh, they're coming fast," said this superintendent, talking about his people. "We don't seem to need much Americanization assistance here—at least so far as ambition is concerned. These people are thrifty, but they live to live. They earn liberally and provide well. No sowbelly and old country soup for them, with a bit of meat once a week. Come over here to the company store and take a look around."

"Does this look like the intolerable conditions President Lewis of the mine workers talks about?" asked the storekeeper as he pulled down heaps of excellent $5 and $6 shoes of the product of 1916 that he has been unable to sell because the workers demanded the best and associated it with the prevailing $10 to $15 prices for this year's styles.

"Why, I haven't sold a ready-made suit to a miner this year for less than $50. They have made up their minds that no good suit sells for less than that price, and that is all there is to it."

The sales records showed that the women were buying georgette waists at $10 to $15 each and the latest ideas in suits. As for the miner's table, nothing goes but the best cuts of meat from scrupulously sanitary cooling rooms and the front rank of every seasonable vegetable and fruit, including some that are not seasonable. Mrs. Miner demands fresh lettuce the year around and is an eager buyer of the advance guard of each fruit or vegetable as the seasons roll around.

This is not profligacy, either, oh, you white-collared city dweller. These miners can afford to pamper their tastes and appetites. With my own eyes I saw pay rolls that contained items of $400 a month for machine coal cutters and any number of "loaders" who had from $50 to $60 a week set down opposite their names—and not a man on the list, even the most humble common laborer, drawing less than $5.05 for an eight-hour day. And rent not more than $12 a month, and cheap coal, and a company store that knows not of profiteering!

Pure Air

The houses may be ugly, but they are cheap, and they are swept by the pure air of the country and surrounded by lovely vistas just beyond the ramshackle back fence. And the miners take advantage of the country. In every house is a shotgun or a rifle, or, maybe, both. The strike order came into effect on November 1; the hunting season opened the same day. The operators had to wait until Monday to know whether the men had gone hunting or striking.

There's no deadly grind for the miners proper. They work when they feel like it. They measure their work by their output and their necessities rather than by the number of hours. The eight-hour day is only a kind of maximum that they mostly ignore. One miner will get out a hundred tons of coal in five days and another won't get out eighty in six days. The superior workman feels that he has earned a day off whenever he feels like it. Or, if he has cleaned up the pile of coal that the cutters and the shooters threw down for him at a certain face, he picks up his kit and trudges to the shaft, even if he has worked only five or six hours.

Besides, the world is very delightful above, there are squirrels in the woods and rabbits in the bushes—and there isn't much life and joy in an underground hole that may be only three feet high. Also, it's lonely. In most mine work the worker toils alone in his room in the coal seam with none but the feeble light of his head lamp, which, by the way, is nowadays likely to be an electric light fed from a small storage battery strapped to his waist.

The mine is dark and in thin seams very cramped and sometimes it is damp, but there is no rain in summer or snow in winter to bother. It is neither very cold in winter nor very warm in summer. Powerful ventilating fans and systems keep the air pure, and the roar of passing trains of "wagons," as the little trams that haul the coal away to the hoisting shaft are called, reminds him that he is always in touch with the outer world.

Reduced Hazards

To be sure, there are hazards peculiar to mining, but they have been greatly reduced in recent years by law and by preventive research. Modern system and machinery have taken much of the hard toil out of the mines. The face of the coal is cut into by a sort of cutting machine electrically operated, the powder holes are punched or drilled with other machines, and the miner has only to shovel up the coal that is thrown down for him by the blasts, shore up his working place and smooth off the ceiling of the chamber. Even the sad old mine mule is getting his freedom, and electric trolleys pull the wagons through the drift entries.

So, after seeing all this—from pit to store and residence—I asked a non-union miner what the strike was about. As he had worked only six hours that day, he couldn't make out the six-hour demand, and as he didn't work more than five days a week unless he felt like it he couldn't fathom the five-day demand. About all he could make out of it was that the strikers wanted to work still less and make still more.

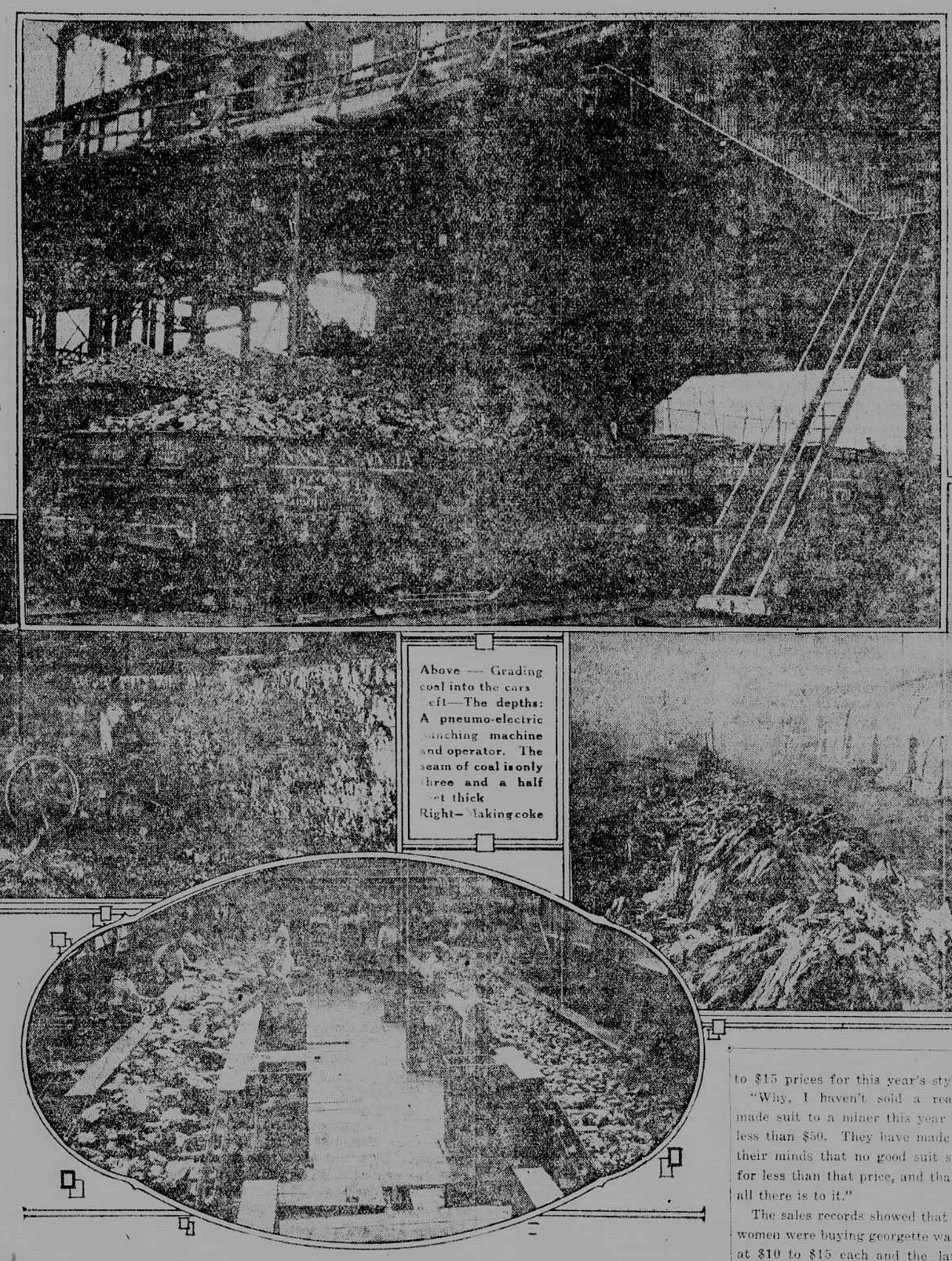
Of course, it must be remembered, in all fairness, that these western Pennsylvania mines and miners are about the most happily situated in the country. When they can get a full car supply from the railroads they can run every working day in the year, including the formidable list of church holidays, and their men know little of the feast-and-famine alternations that characterize some mining districts. In those districts the miners explain that their five-day week and six hours a day is nothing more than an effort to stabilize production in an effort to force a uniform demand. Really, they say, take it the year through, they don't work even that much now. Viewed in that light they are striking for more work instead of less, but in any event for a higher rate of pay.

On the Surface

While underground conditions are improving from year to year, the surface environment also is getting better. The new mining towns are not ugly monotones. The two-story eyesores in maroon and gray are giving way to cheerful one-family bungalows, the muddy lanes to trimly concreted streets, the raggy front yards to smooth lawns. Bath tubs are being more freely introduced, now that the foreigners are beginning to use them legitimately instead of as storage chests for coal or the family baking, and the better managed mines are putting in ample shower bath and locker equipment at the mines, so that your $3,000 a-year worker can look the part as he goes to and returns from his work, and not, as now, like an escaped burnt-cork actor—especially when he is riding in his own auto.

After all, it may be that the intolerable conditions that Mr. Lewis complains of are only the illusions aroused by too much prosperity. That's what the mine superintendent thought when his men notified him that they would quit if he did not add garages to their $12-a-month houses. But he added them

It's a Grimy Trade From First to Last



Above — Grading coal into the cars left—The depths: A pneumo-electric mining machine and operator. The seam of coal is only three and a half feet thick Right—Taking coke

"Picking" the coal to remove impurities as it passes on conveyors from the tipple to the cars

Saving Money on an Army Job

THERE is surcease and balm for the overtaxed citizen in these hectic days of billion-dollar governmental budgets and departmental squandering of public funds to know that there is at least one branch of the United States service that not only is paying its own way, but which to date has earned hundreds of thousands of dollars for the Administration's coffers.

Peculiarly enough, this thrifty group of governmental workers is a cog in the army machine, the organization which has been roasted to a brown turn because of its wastefulness during the war. It is the Labor Employment Branch of the United States Army, with headquarters at 54 Dey Street, and when its service record is written—though it may be garnished with silver chevrons, denoting exclusively at-home service—the public will be proud to acc'laim it. Under the guidance of Captain A. B. Cox, the officer in charge, this bureau has accomplished the following "big things":

1. Provided all the longshoremen, dock hands and laborers required for the movement of army supplies and troops during the war. Eighty thousand such applications have been passed on.

2. Employed stewards, coal passers, deck hands and machinists needed on army transports. More than 12,500 have been handled.

3. Administered all the insurance required in the employment of these men and paid promptly and efficiently all claims.

4. Has been so discerning and cautious in its operations that despite the thousands of workers assigned who were theretofore unknown to the bureau not one overt act has resulted—not an explosion or outrage of any sort during the entire period of the war.

The amount of money saved cannot be figured to the dollar, because of the fluctuating scale adopted by the shipmasters and other agents who formerly supplied workers to the government, at an average cost of $20 a man, but it is certain that it has totaled nearly $1,000,000 in the employing department of the bureau alone.

Insurance premiums paid on the policies held for the workers formerly amounted to considerably more than $1,000,000 a year. All this money is saved by the insurance and compensation department, under the direction of Captain Albert M. Petite, a veteran officer who has proved himself as adept in his new calling as he was in the numerous campaigns in which he participated.

Captain Cox, whose official title is Officer in Charge of Labor, Office of the Port Utilities Officer, supervises the entire establishment, which occupies three floors in the Dey Street Building, and he is at his desk for hours every day, taking an active part in the work of all departments. One hundred per cent efficient himself, he has with him a staff just as capable, consequently the bureau is a hive of industry from morning till night.

Creed, color and even experience—excepting in the technical work—are not considered at the Army Employment Branch. All a man has to prove when he seeks work is that he has a good record in civil life and is physically fit for the job for which he applies.